THE CATHOLIC ROOTS FOR COLUMBUS DAY

AN ESSAY BY

LARRY SOUTHWICK
ljsouthwick@outlook.com
https://archive.org/search?query=larry+southwick

January 2026

Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/

THE CATHOLIC ROOTS FOR COLUMBUS DAY
By Larry Southwick, Catholic writer about my faith

The roots for Columbus Day go all the way back to Luke 10:1-12 with Jesus sending out 72 of his disciples ahead to prepare the way for his following, and subsequently in Matthew 28:19-20, where he commanded his disciples to make disciples of all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In accordance with the above two directions by Jesus, the Catholic Church has been a missionary church from the very beginning. St. Paul was the most notable 'missionary' spreading Christ's message and converting the region to Christianity. Subsequently, Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, including mostly white Europe, establishing a base for what followed below.

Discovery Doctrine introduced:
Fast forward to 1452, when Pope Nicholas V issued the papal bull *Dum Diversas*, which authorized Portugal to "conquer Saracens and pagans and consign them to 'perpetual servitude'." And again in 1455, Pope Nicholas V issued *Romanus Pontifex*, which extended Portugal's authority to "conquer the lands of infidels and pagans for "the salvation of all" in order to "pardon ... their souls." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery_doctrine)

Between the mid-fifteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, this idea allowed European entities to seize lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples under the guise of "discovering new land", meaning land not inhabited by Christians. The concept of *terra nullius* was a major part of the discovery doctrine, particularly around the Indigenous people of North America. *Terra nullius*, meaning that land was empty or void, was a justification for European groups to claim that land for their country, despite the many Indigenous groups already present on the continent. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery_doctrine)

So, Columbus and other European explorers had the official backing of the Catholic Church to not only explore and establish trade around the world but as Christian missionaries, to expand the Church and 'convert all nations.' It gave them moral authority to claim the land in the name of their sponsoring nations and establish their own colonies on them. Hence,

colonial imperialism was an extension of the Church's mission to convert the world.

That colonialism included the conversion (perhaps with coercion rather than persuasion) of indigenous peoples around the world. That vast missionary accomplishment led Pope Leo XIII to issue a proclamation in 1892 for the world-wide establishment of Columbus Day:

QUARTO ABEUNTE SAECULO,
ENCYCLICAL OF POPE LEO XIII ON THE COLUMBUS QUADRICENTENNIAL
To Our Venerable Brethren, the Archbishops and Bishops of Spain, Italy, and the two Americas.
https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_16071892_quarto-abeunte-saeculo.html
(the following are excerpts from this encyclical)

Now that four centuries have sped since a Ligurian first, under God's guidance, touched shores unknown beyond the Atlantic, the whole world is eager to celebrate the memory of the event, and glorify its author. Nor could a worthier reason be found where through zeal should be kindled. For the exploit is in itself the highest and grandest which any age has ever seen accomplished by man; and he who achieved it, for the greatness of his mind and heart, can be compared to but few in the history of humanity. By his toil another world emerged from the unsearched bosom of the ocean: hundreds of thousands of mortals have, from a state of blindness, been raised to the common level of the human race, reclaimed from savagery to gentleness and humanity; and, greatest of all, by the acquisition of those blessings of which Jesus Christ is the author, they have been recalled from destruction to eternal life.

It is indubitable that the Catholic faith was the strongest motive for the inception and prosecution of the design; so that for this reason also the whole human race owes not a little to the Church.

There were great tracts of land lying towards the West, beyond the limits of the known world, lands hitherto explored by no man, he saw in spirit a mighty multitude, cloaked in miserable darkness, given over to evil rites,

and the superstitious worship of vain gods. Miserable it is to live in a barbarous state and with savage manners: but more miserable to lack the knowledge of that which is highest, and to dwell in ignorance of the one true God.

And, above all, it is fitting that we should confess and celebrate in an especial manner the will and designs of the Eternal Wisdom, under whose guidance the discoverer of the New World placed himself with a devotion so touching.

We decree, therefore, that on October 12, or on the following Sunday, if the Ordinary should prefer it, in all the Cathedral churches and convent chapels throughout Spain, Italy, and the two Americas, after the office of the day there shall be celebrated a Solemn Mass of the Most Holy Trinity.

Given at Rome, from St. Peter's, on the 16th day of July, 1892, in the fifteenth year of Our Pontificate. LEO XIII

That ‘Christian’ ideology (white colonial imperialism) led to the decimation (genocide) of indigenous peoples throughout North and South America with similar treatment around the world. It led to the wars against the Native Americans across the west and putting those who survived into reservations. To make matters even more genocidal, they established native boarding schools to strip the indigenous children of their culture in order to assimilate them into the white Christian model.

So, after hundreds of years of that mindset, in April 2022 Pope Francis apologized to the First Nations in Canada for the scandal of the native boarding schools, the first such acknowledgement of the errors and guilt for its impacts. That led to the subsequent acknowledgement and repudiation of native boarding schools in the US by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops which established an organization to address the scandal.

Finally, “on March 30, 2023, Pope Francis repudiated the “Doctrine of Discovery”: a set of ideas the Spanish and Portuguese, in particular, used to justify seizing land they had “discovered” and colonizing Indigenous people in the land they came to call the Americas. The Vatican’s statement not only rejected the doctrine but also apologized for historical atrocities carried out by Christians and affirmed the rights and cultural values of Indigenous peoples.”

https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/one-year-ago-pope-francis-disavowed-the-doctrine-of-discovery-but-indigenous-catholics-work-for-respect-and-recognition-goes-back-decades/ar-BB1kGXJy?ocid=msedgntp&cvid=c112936c2e524489a04097cefefd0262&ei=62

But we still see that mindset in today's political environment, e.g., Christian nationalism, racism, the maltreatment of immigrants, etc. We saw it in President Trump's first term when he said he didn't want immigrants from those "s__t-hole countries." We see it now in the conservative whitewashing of history to erase the negative aspects of that ideology and eliminate 'woke' ideas.

Christian? How ironic!